

UK: Labour saves Conservative government from defeat on EU referendum bill

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Britain's newly elected Conservative government avoided a parliamentary defeat in a vote over conditions for the planned referendum on European Union (EU) membership Tuesday.

This was thanks solely to the Labour Party, which abstained from the vote to prevent the passage of an amendment tabled by Tory rebels.

The dispute concerned the provision known as “purdah,” which states that in the lead up to elections or referenda, governments must remain neutral. This principle was followed in last year's Scottish independence referendum, but Prime Minister David Cameron insisted that it would be impossible to abide by it in the EU vote since day-to-day business would grind to a halt.

A group of 27 Tory MPs supported an amendment to the government bill demanding “purdah” be maintained. They hoped to strengthen the position of the official anti-EU campaign, which they support. The amendment was backed by the third largest party, the Scottish National Party, and the UK Independence Party's (UKIP) one MP. With Cameron enjoying a working majority of just 16, Labour could have defeated the government by voting for the amendment.

Instead, Labour demonstrated its readiness to form an alliance with the Cameron government over British EU membership. Justifying its move, a Labour source claimed that the party had obtained significant concessions and had taken a “principled stand.” The government said it had agreed not to hold the vote on May 5, 2016, and that new regulations would be introduced to determine what government ministers could and could not do during the campaign.

Cameron hopes to secure reforms to EU regulations, enabling Britain to opt out of the process of “ever closer union,” restrict immigration from EU member

states and strengthen the powers of its national parliament. Based on such concessions, he is seeking to appease the Eurosceptic wing of his party while calling for a vote in the upcoming referendum in favour of Britain remaining part of the EU.

His position is precarious, and a defeat would have badly damaged his government. Earlier this month, Cameron was already forced to make a rapid U-turn after he returned from a meeting with President Barack Obama at the G-7 summit in Bavaria, who had stressed US support for Britain remaining in the EU. Cameron responded by threatening his MPs that they would have to quit if they wanted to campaign for Britain leaving the EU.

This provoked a backlash by the more than 50 Tory MPs who have formed Conservatives for Britain, demanding that Cameron prove to them that he can “end the supremacy of EU law over more matters of British life.”

Cameron declared on June 7 that he had “been very clear that if you want to be part of the government, you have to take the view that we are engaged in an exercise of renegotiation, have a referendum and that will lead to a successful outcome.” The next morning he recanted.

Internationally, Cameron's position is also parlous. The deepening crisis over Greece, with the country facing imminent bankruptcy and the possibility of exiting the euro, and divisions over the EU's policy of dispersing thousands of refugees who have fled North Africa and the Middle East, both threaten to overshadow Cameron's plans.

He continued diplomatic efforts this week, visiting Italian Prime Minister Matteo Renzi on Wednesday before planned meetings with the governments of Slovenia, Luxembourg and Slovakia. He aims to have

met with all 27 heads of government prior to next week's European Council meeting. But the latest heads of government to speak out against treaty reforms were the prime ministers of Spain, Belgium and Finland.

In this context, Labour's decision to side with the government goes far beyond the immediate issue of "purdah."

Last month, acting Labour leader Harriet Harman and foreign affairs spokesman Hilary Benn announced in a jointly written article in the *Sunday Times* that the party was now in favour of the Conservatives' proposal to hold a referendum on Britain's EU membership by 2017.

Labour's shadow cabinet has been sharply divided on whether to launch its own campaign and refuse to work jointly with the Conservative leadership for a "yes" vote, or join a cross-party initiative.

Pat McFadden, shadow Europe minister, remarked on the formation of the pro-EU Labour "yes" campaign group, "The past week has shown the continuing disarray in the Conservative party over Europe. Labour Yes will be speaking up for a strong and leading role for Britain in Europe."

However, Chuka Umunna, the shadow business minister, took the view that closer cooperation with the Tories and business would be required. "We should also play our part within a broad campaign involving a variety of different groups."

Support for the group initially came from 70 MPs, with more expected to follow. Four Labour MPs defied the party whip and voted with the Tory rebels.

Labour's decision to publicly align itself with the government is driven by the desire to prove its reliability to its main constituency in the financial and business elites, which are overwhelmingly in favour of continued EU membership. This was summed up by the two MPs chosen as joint chairmen of Labour Yes, Pat Glass and Phil Wilson. Glass noted that Labour's campaign would make the case for Britain to stay in Europe "based on trade, jobs, investment and our place in the world."

Wilson claimed, "Companies like Hitachi and Nissan in the north-east employ thousands of people and part of their reason for being located in the UK is access to the single market. Half the cars made here by Nissan are exported to the EU."

In truth, the EU has become synonymous with the

destruction of jobs, austerity programmes, the bailout of the banks and financial elite, and a never-ending assault on living standards. The most advanced expression of these socially destructive policies can be seen in Greece, where the EU has dictated vicious social attacks that have impoverished millions.

A section of Labour has responded to the hostility towards the EU felt by growing sections of the population by urging the embrace of an even more openly right-wing and nationalist programme. Around 30 Labour MPs are to set up the Labour for Britain group, which will campaign for the EU to be reformed in line with Cameron's demands and advocate a British exit if this is not successful.

The campaign reflects UKIP's right-wing demagoguery and reactionary nationalism. Kate Hoey, a leading figure in the group, described Labour for Britain's aim in a *New Statesman* interview: "To get back to our parliament the right to make its own laws, the right to have complete control of our economy, to decide everything that relates to our own country and of course that is fundamentally opposed to what the original aims of the common market were."

She berated the party leadership for its failure to present proposals for EU reform, and gave her full backing to Cameron's demand for restrictions on freedom of movement. She was angered that "somebody can walk in from Romania or Latvia with no history of involvement in this country whatsoever" and asserted that many Labour supporters "voted for UKIP and will continue to do so until this is treated in a serious way."

Hoey went on, "There's just a feeling that we're half-hearted about being British, we're half-hearted about the monarchy, we're half-hearted about the way we see our country in the world."



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